

# The Honors Program

# Let Knowledge Grow

By Paula Baker

If success in education were measured in numerical growth, the University of Oklahoma Honors Program could be counted a success. Enrollment of the freshman honors students was up 37 percent from 230 last year to 316 in 1989-90, with pre-enrollment for fall 1990 well over that number by mid-summer.

If success were counted in monetary recognition, the Honors Program could point to a two-year, \$100,380 federal grant for its Intellectual Centering program for freshmen. OU's request was one of the three percent of grant proposals selected for funding by the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). Established in 1985, FIPSE provides yearly project grants for the assistance of innovative programs that improve the access to and the quality of post-secondary education.

In reality, however, educational success is measured in the growth of individuals who learn to develop their intellectual abilities to the fullest and use them to enhance the quality of their lives and those of others. The University recognized this premise in

1987 when the Honors Program, in existence since 1960, was revitalized and expanded. The need for continued enhancement is stressed in OU's long-range plan, Strategy for Excellence.

After exhaustive study by a University-wide task force, Associate Professor of Psychology Nancy Mergler was chosen to oversee the renaissance. Program Director Mergler received her bachelor's degree in psychology from William Smith College and her master's and doctoral degrees in developmental psychology from Syracuse University. At OU, she has been awarded a Junior Faculty Summer Research Fellowship, served on the Graduate College Research Council and has been a member of the executive committees of both the colleges of Arts and Sciences and Liberal Studies.

The Honors Program, which takes its motto from Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "Let knowledge grow from more to more," is an enrichment opportunity, not a short cut through college. The first class of gifted students who will have received the nurturing of the program for a full four years will not graduate until 1991. Their Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes and Supreme Court ap-

pointments are half a lifetime away. Even the M.D.s, J.D.s and Ph.D.s to which most aspire are years in the future.

Nevertheless, the excitement in the Honors House lounge during a parents' brunch on the day of Commencement demonstrates the students' pride in completing their challenging honors requirements, which include special courses, individual research and grade points of at least 3.25 on a 4.0 scale.

During Commencement exercises, honors students wear special red-lined hoods. Their diplomas are inscribed with OU's loftiest accolades, "with Honors," "with High Honors" and "with Highest Honors," depending on their cumulative grade points ranging from 3.25 through 3.75. These designations are the OU equivalent of cum laude, magna cum laude and summa cum laude, and carry more prestige than the degrees "with Distinction," defined by individual colleges based primarily on grade point alone.

"People in the Honors Program are over-achievers and dedicated students," says Diana Morales, a letters major from Durant. "It has been

stimulating and exciting to meet the different types of students from all over Oklahoma and out-of-state."

Morales came from a Spanish-speaking home and is now a graduate student and assistant in modern languages. She plans to attend law school.

"One of my courses, New Social History, definitely changed the way I read and analyze history," Morales says. "I read 13 books and chose four for essays and then did my own historical research at the Oklahoma Historical Society on Choctaw and Bryan counties. I enjoyed my honors reading and research project in Hispanic-American literature because it gave me an opportunity to work one-on-one with a professor."

Morales came to OU as a transfer student from Southeastern State University in Durant and learned about the program from friends and a notice in the student paper. Now, however, recruiting for the Honors Program is more intense than when Morales transferred to OU. The honors staff works closely with OU's Office of High School and College Relations to introduce its offerings to potential applicants. The program office gets an automatic print-out of eligible students' names, buys lists of eligible students from PSAT exams given across the country and participates in on-campus recruitment days.

The main source of merit-based scholarship aid for entering freshman honors students comes from their selection as University Scholars, Alumni Scholars, R. Boyd Gunning Scholars, etc. All these groups are coordinated by Mergler under the umbrella of the OU Scholars Program. The recipients are advised by Honors Program advisers, and most elect to join the Honors Program before arriving on campus.

To apply for the program, freshmen

must make a composite ACT score of 27 or higher or a composite SAT score of 1100 or higher, be the recipient of one of a number of designated scholarships or be the valedictorian of an Oklahoma high school. Selection follows submission of a personal essay.

The approximately 1,000 students in the OU Honors Program come from both large and small towns, with the 21 percent non-residents coming from 22 states from California to New York; 20 percent are minorities. They represent the University's colleges propor-



*Among the bright, highly motivated, creative students taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the OU Honors Program are Bill Pryor, left, Richelle Ozbirn, Mo Goff and Marianne Hartigan.*

tionately, with approximately one-third enrolled in business, another third in arts and sciences and engineering, and the remainder are scattered among the smaller colleges. Approximately 200 live in honors housing located in New Cate Center; they are both Greeks and independents.

Honors students must maintain a 3.25 grade point requirement while completing regular course work and a minimum of 20 hours of honors-designated course work. They must participate in an upper-division colloquium, a team-taught interdisciplinary course and complete directed

readings and a research project. The latter culminates in an honors thesis which is on file at the Honors House.

"These are the students who will go out and be the leaders of society," contends director Mergler. "They have the creativity and intelligence to help us out of some of the particular problems we have created in society. Many will go directly to medical school, law school or other graduate programs. Only the business students tend to get a job and work for awhile before going for an MBA or to pursue other advanced education.

"These academically talented students have not been offered specialized services in the past, which is really crazy considering that a university is all about knowledge," says Mergler.

"Public institutions have a diversity of students with special needs and talents," she says. "Special services have been provided for athletes and the physically handicapped and cultural minorities. These services are necessary, but I find it refreshing that all across the country universities are starting to recognize that academically talented students have special needs.

"Many are bright enough to do pretty well on their own, but others need all the help they can get," Mergler explains. "They are strong academically and used to earning A's, but they lack time management skills. They come to OU expecting to participate in all the clubs and extracurricular activities they used to do in high school—and make good grades. They tend to overcommit themselves, and many don't know how to plan a 30-hour study week. They set high standards for themselves, and their first B can be devastating. We offer the kind of support that allows them to set reasonable goals. *Continued*

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"A lot of honors students have talents in many domains," Mergler continues. "It can be difficult for them to choose a major, so our strategy is to provide them with sympathetic advising and a friendly office that welcomes them in the door."

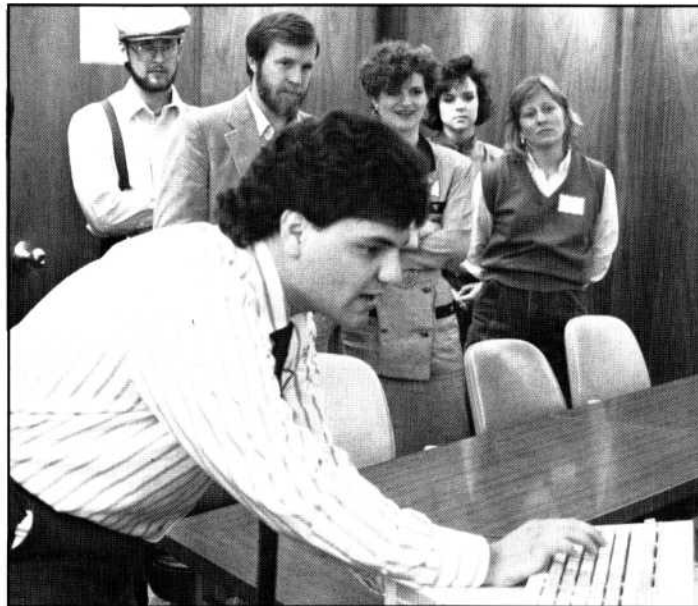
The 1987 special honors task force recommended that OU revitalize its program to make it comparable to the best in the nation. With input from then-President Frank Horton and Provost Joan Wadlow, Mergler revamped the program with the advice of the Honors Council, which included representatives from all undergraduate degree-granting colleges.

Among her duties was overseeing the renovation of New Cate Center to provide dormitory rooms, offices for the program, study areas and a lounge stocked with major national newspapers and magazines as well as an informal area for relaxation. Mergler also was in charge of extracurricular programming, reviewing admission and retention and appointing an assistant director from the faculty. David Gross, associate professor of English, holds that position on a half-time basis. Jeff Bloomgarden is the full-time academic counselor, and Mary Byrd is the program assistant.

"There is nothing we are trying to achieve that couldn't or shouldn't be the goal of the University as a whole, not just the Honors Program," Gross says. "Excellent, innovative, high-quality education always should be our goal, and certainly it exists at this institution. But the Honors Program does have certain resources, including a pool of bright and highly-motivated students, which make such goals both more urgent and less difficult to attain."

Although bright and highly-motivated, students who have entered

OU's Honors Program as freshmen left some puzzling and disappointing statistics that demonstrated the need for special programs just for them. Each year approximately 250 direct-from-high school freshmen apply to, and are accepted into, the OU Honors Program. According to their standardized test scores and high school grades, these exceptional young people should be able to maintain a 3.25 GPA during their first year in college—yet the mid-year typically finds 40 percent of these students below the 3.25 mark.



*David Pinto, a mathematics/philosophy senior, demonstrates his cognitive science project during 1990 Undergraduate Research Day, an event involving students from throughout the Southwest.*

As Mergler points out in her FIPSE proposal for OU's Intellectual Centering program for freshmen:

"To risk the alienation of these students is to have student leaders who are jaded and cynical about the enterprises of the academy. Incorporation of these highly talented students . . . in such a way that they become active scholars/leaders will contribute to both the well-being of the student body at large and to faculty morale. More importantly, a successful incorporation of these honors freshmen into 'the Life of the Mind' will help produce young educated adults who under-

stand and value the significance of higher education in our society."

The Intellectual Centering program OU devised consists of a set of pre-freshman residential seminars and an innovative honors course titled "The Academic Habit."

One cycle of Intellectual Centering occurred during the summer and fall of 1989. Eighty honors freshmen participated in four credit-bearing colloquia, each taught by three OU faculty members. The colloquia fell into two categories: "The Life of the Mind," which focused on an interdisciplinary idea, and "The Cycle of Knowledge," which focused on the process of research. Students lived in Honors House while attending these week-long courses. During the evening Bloomgarden conducted workshops on the nature of the undergraduate degree, the relationship between education and the world of work, time and stress management, and recognizing and identifying sources of help for students at the University.

During the fall, the same students enrolled in "The Academic Habit," for which they earned one hour of honors credit, attending eight lectures and cultural events and keeping a journal of critical responses to them.

The program is being expanded in the summer and fall of 1990, and participants will be tracked throughout their academic careers with a control group of honors students who did not participate in the program. The control group is matched to those in the seminars by major, entering grade point and standardized test scores, Mergler explains. Both groups of students are given the PACE test, a unique standardized test that measures personal growth and subjective response to one's education. Mergler

predicts that the two groups will differ not only on grades earned but more importantly on how personally committed they are to their educational experience.

"The Honors Program isn't just about grade points," Mergler says. "It is designed to be a thought-provoking, enriching experience that will stimulate students to make commitments to the 'life of the mind.'"

"Intellectual Centering was a tremendous opportunity for me," says sophomore Matt Reed of Alva. "It was the most beneficial introduction to the campus I could have had. It helped me familiarize myself with the campus and get my mind on school and what I wanted out of OU. I learned to manage my time and avoid stress.

"Professors Bekele, McKibbin and Morris (Gezahegne, Lawrence and J.R.) were excellent," Reed says. "They gave me the opportunity to feel that OU had an important academic environment in addition to athletics and activities."

Reed, a high school debater, was recruited by universities as far away as Kentucky. He elected to attend OU because of the Honors Program. Ranking 10th in his high school class, he scored 29 on his ACT.

"Participating in the Academic Habit was great," he says. "I was used to going to plays because of my activities in speech. I enjoyed the English department films, but I thought the lectures I attended were the most exciting. I was fascinated by a man from the University of Hawaii."

(Henry Kariel, a professor of political science, is noted for his lively presentation of the problems and potentials of contemporary social and political situations. His lectures at OU were titled "Nothing Special — Enacting Modernity Within Ironic Performances" and "Strategies for Working in No Man's Land.")

"Some of the students didn't like keeping a journal about the events they attended," Reed adds, "but I felt that I would like to keep a journal the rest of my life.

"Another good thing about the Hon-

ors Program is that we can work with small groups and be recognized when we go into the honors office," he says. "We're not 'elite' — honors students just have good entrance exams—but we have a sense of community. In the Intellectual Centering program, we are encouraged to move beyond honors events and attend other things on campus."

A major component of the Honors Program mission that benefits the entire campus is the sponsorship or co-sponsorship of a variety of special lectures or performances designed to stimulate new interests and critical thinking.

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Mergler says. "The students are very polite, perhaps too polite. We try to put them in contact with scholars and thinkers in informal settings such as meals, as well as classes, lectures and discussions. We prod them to question authority so they have a better sense of their own minds."

Planning sessions identify major domains of knowledge in which speakers should be sought—from the sciences to the humanities to the fine arts. Some are selected from personal acquaintances, and others represent areas that should be covered.

"We like to co-sponsor speakers with other units," Mergler says. "This works both ways. We enjoy getting the academic community enthusiastic and involved. The Scholars Suite in honors housing may be reserved by any academic unit. Our students benefit from the public lectures and even

more by the informal chats they have with the visiting scholars who wander out into the lounge. OU Food Services assists with an occasional catered meal, which provides an informal dinner opportunity.

"Carl Albert and his wife were Honors House luncheon guests on the occasion of the Rothbaum lecture," Mergler recalls. (The Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lectureship in Representative Government is sponsored by OU's Carl Albert Center.) "The students were awed and intrigued by Albert but learned that he was 'just folks' when he sat down and talked with them.

"Samuel P. Huntington from Harvard was the guest lecturer, presenting three lectures on the transformation of the world to democracy. Our students asked Huntington a series of hard questions. This is the kind of thing that will get the students thinking more about national and international issues. It was very interesting, and I have seen our students capitalize on situations such as this again and again."

Faculty and guest lecturers have tackled subjects ranging from the biology of early earth to aspects of the black struggle for freedom, political movements in Central America to the role of women in ancient Egypt. Actor Ed Harris, a Norman native, provided a free showing of his film "Walker."

The San Francisco Mime Troupe gave a public performance and workshops for honors, drama and dance students. Renowned musicians have performed and conducted master classes under the aegis of the Honors Program and other sponsors. Gross' lecture on "Rock and Roll and Liberal Education" has been offered three times because of its popularity.

On Undergraduate Research Day, honors students have an opportunity to be on the other side of the podium.

"Getting undergraduates more involved in research is another part of OU's Strategy for Excellence," Mergler says. "National studies demonstrate that hands-on research is what really gets students involved in the

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'life of the mind.' OU's first Undergraduate Research Day coincided with Mom's Day, so parents could see sons and daughters presenting scholarly work to a supportive environment of fellow students and OU faculty for a first-time experience. Small research grants are available and are used for everything from buying equipment to paying for dance costumes to providing transportation to a professional convention."

Undergraduate Research Day encourages submissions in poetry and prose and varied art forms, in addition to papers on a variety of research topics. Video and slide presentations in music, art and dance categories are accepted, as they are in honors research theses. OU's Undergraduate Research Day is open to all undergraduates in the Southwest and illustrates the University's role in providing leadership in honors education.

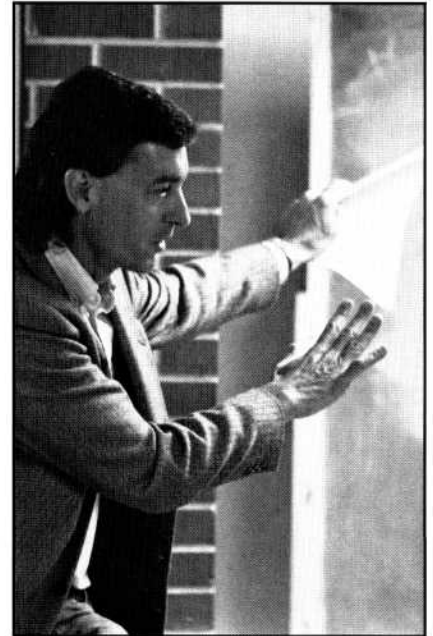
OU has the most extensive honors program in the state, Mergler says. The University of Tulsa has a "Great Books" type curriculum for honors students. Oklahoma State University is moving from separate college-based programs to a university-wide program, and several state junior colleges are inaugurating honors programs. Mergler is available for consultation with these institutions. She also participates in the activities of the National Collegiate Honors Council.

The Honors Program provides information and serves as a clearing-house for a variety of special opportunities for OU students in general and honors students in particular. Truman and Mellon fellowships and Rhodes, Marshall and Goldwater Scholarships are among the many described in *The OU Honors Program Newsletter*.

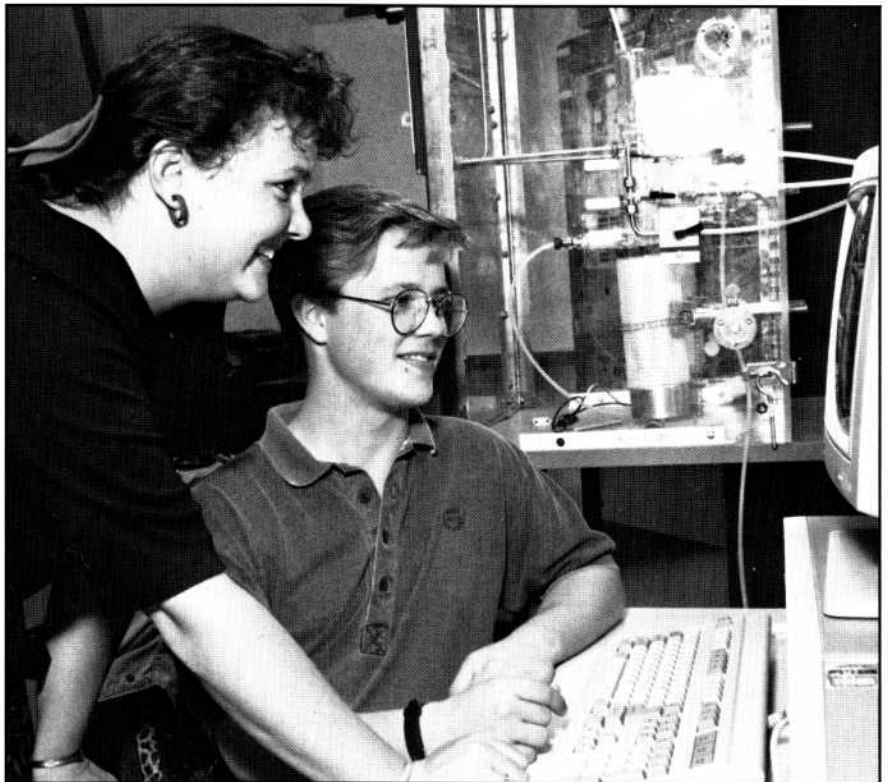
Mark Chatterji of Duncan was one of 100 students from around the world selected to attend the Pugwash U.S.A. International Conference to address issues at the interface of science, technology and society. Lamont Jones of Hugo was one of 50 students from across the country selected for Leadership America. Cecilia White of Caney, 1989-90 president of the Honors Stu-



*In 1987 Nancy Mergler was chosen to revitalize the OU Honors Program.*



*David Gross delivers a lecture on Rock and Roll and Liberal Education.*

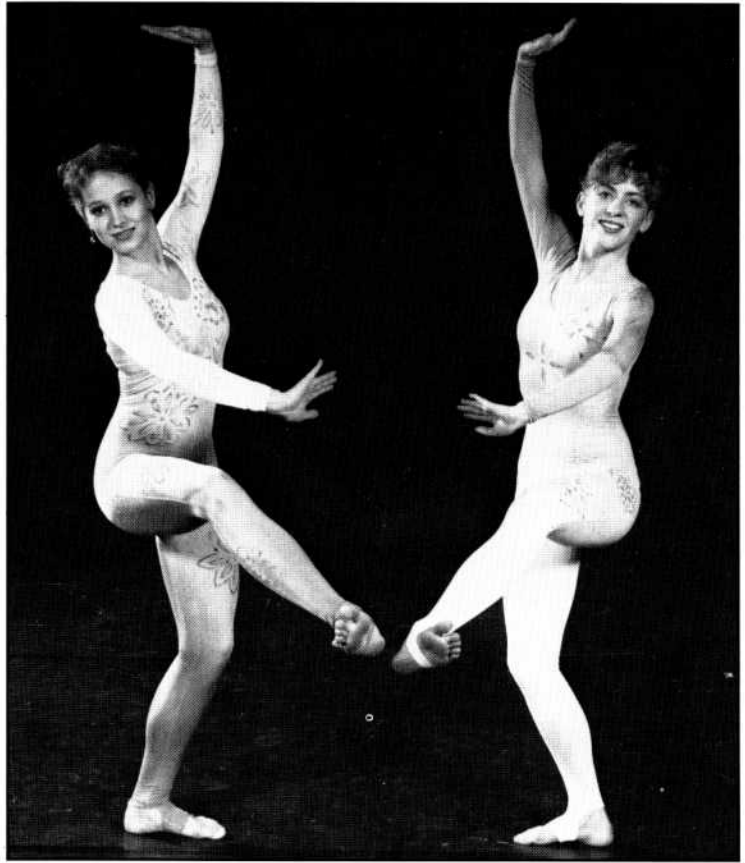


*Juniors in the University's Honors Program, Richelle Ozbirn, left, and Jason Anderson received the first two-summer internships at the OU Energy Center, an example of the special opportunities available to these top students.*

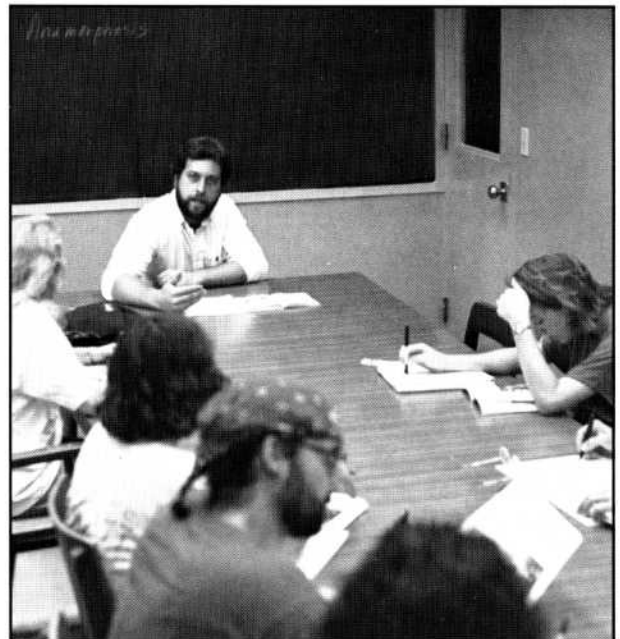


*ABOVE: Students from the Honors Program, drama and dance practice focusing their energies on a single point in a San Francisco Mime Troupe workshop.*

*RIGHT: OU honors student Kristina Weaver, left, rehearsing with graduate student Karen Flygare, won one of six awards on 1990 Undergraduate Research Day.*



*Louis Griffis, left, visits his son George, an OU honors exchange student in natural science whose studies in West Germany enabled him to observe the dismantling of the Berlin Wall.*



*Assistant professor of modern languages Michael Layne conducts a honors seminar in semiotics, an analysis method in linguistics and anthropology used to study culture.*

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dent Association, attended Washington Center's Campaign '88 symposium at the Republican National Convention.

Honors students Jason Anderson of Norman and Richelle Ozbirn of Edmond are completing the second of a two-summer Honors Internship at the OU Energy Center. Another student exchange program restricted to an honors student in the natural sciences allowed George Griffis of Norman to observe the dismantling of the Berlin Wall during his studies at the Technical University of Berlin.

"He was just thrilled to be in the middle of all the political excitement," says his mother, Molly Levite Griffis ('60 B.A.). "He visited an East German family frequently, coached a basketball team and passed all of his exams in German, so he could keep up with his OU class. We feel the OU Honors Program gave him the opportunity of a lifetime, and we will be eternally grateful."

"Parents tend to be pleased with the program," Mergler says. "They appreciate the fact that the honors office is a place where they can get a lot done at once. However, they are concerned about the effect that the Honors Program can have on grade points."

By taking more challenging courses in competition with the brightest students on campus, honors students run the risk of lower grades than they might have achieved by following a less demanding course of study.

Except for the awards and scholarships handled through the office, the Honors Program staff doesn't try to keep tabs on prizes gained by program participants.

"We let their own colleges honor them as students," Mergler says. "We don't try to add new clubs to the campus. Honors students are 'joiners' by

nature. I'd say 80 percent of Student Congress is composed of honors students. We try to get our students to contribute by working in clubs that are already on campus and by asking thoughtful questions."

The Honors Student Association has completed one badly needed service project for its sponsoring office. Its members encoded the names of all honors degree recipients into the OU Alumni Association data base, providing a method of keeping track of these special graduates. Now the office is

the British tutorial method, a system he admired but had not experienced personally. He hopes to do it again, despite the demands on his spare time (weekly sessions with each of the 11 students in his course to discuss the required books and papers added up to 106 separate meetings).

In an article in *The National Honors Report*, Snell admitted some concern that the students, although willing to work hard, were not ready to take risks in their thinking.


"This course in itself was a risk for some," Snell wrote of his honors experience, "but intellectually I did not see much real testing of ideas. I conclude the students need more courses like this one, where they will be forced to take and defend positions; only then will they get good at it."

Attending colloquia is another, and required, way for the students to learn to question themselves and each other. "The Greek Mind" paired philosophy professor Leo Werneke of Oklahoma City University with Phil Chandler, assistant director of the Energy Center, as team teachers. The object was to prevent the unopposed profession of authoritative opinion and to encourage students to address each

other rather than a teacher.

Chandler notes that students "don't know which end of the table to look to, for where the truth lies. They have to think for themselves. I find that liberating for all of us."

"Greek Mind" colloquium participant Kevin Conley of Broken Arrow sums up his experience—and the Honors Program:

"We don't walk away with objective knowledge; we walk away with thinking skills, really thinking for ourselves and dealing with other people doing the same thing. We develop a trust for our minds." 



Honors House resident Jayne Ann Arnold of Bartlesville, a junior mathematics major, came to OU as an Alumni Scholar and earned one of two 1989-90 Honors Program scholarships.

contacting honors alumni to obtain information on interesting careers and any other advice they may wish to share.

"Many list educational institutions as their places of employment," Mergler says, "so it may be that they are continuing to find satisfaction in the 'life of the mind.'"

"The OU faculty also has been receptive to the program," she adds, "especially those who have become involved in the teaching process."

History professor Daniel Snell fulfilled a long-standing ambition to teach a course in ancient history by